Grigorijus Potašenko continues his research into Old Believer communities and their culture in Lithuania and the Baltic region. This time, he turns his focus to the history of the formation of the Old Believer community in Klaipėda (KOBC), and its development and religious life from when it was created in 1946 until 2018. This is a case study where, in addition to traditional historical research methods and sources largely unveiled by the author for the first time ever (archival documents and Old Believers’ works), oral history material collected from members of the community, the religious fathers and parishioners of the KOBC are also used. Memories and recollections were very valuable for describing and reconstructing the community’s early history in Lithuania’s port city.

‘The Klaipėda Old Believer Community’ is a rather large book (444 pages), richly illustrated with photographs the author collected from both state archives and the personal photograph albums of community members. Potašenko’s book is very important for understanding the history of both Lithuania’s Old Believers and of ethnic and confessional communities in the port city, as practically no one else has devoted separate research to the Klaipėda Old Believer community. According to him, despite ‘widespread and active interest in the rich history of

Klaipėda (formerly Memel), the oldest city in Lithuania, as well as its contemporary situation and its varied culture arising in the last three decades, almost no attention has been shown to local Old Believers and their Pomorian community in Lithuanian and foreign historiography' (p. 408). We can agree with the author, and at least appreciate the fact that he has approached the topic with great inspiration. Finding a way into the rather insular community and earning the trust of its members, he not only reveals the history of its existence in the Lithuanian port city, but also shows how traditional communities are sustained in urban society. As is known, Old Believers are a unique community, demonstrating and upholding their strong identity for more than a few centuries, which they have brought to Klaipėda after the Second World War and are continuing to nurture. Even though Old Believers never lived in Klaipėda until then, today the community is an inseparable part of the port city. The community’s history is closely entwined with the history of the city itself, and of Lithuania.

The author states that his goal was to write a detailed history of the Old Believer community in Klaipėda, relating it to its political and social contexts. Potašenko begins with a concise history of the Old Believers in Lithuania, and then turns to a more comprehensive analysis of the emergence of the Klaipėda Old Believer community, its move to Klaipėda which began in 1946, the start of the community’s religious life, their life in the postwar years, the late Soviet period and after 1990. The author describes the KOBC relations with government institutions, and takes into account the effect of religious policies pursued by USSR central and local governments, and then later of the Lithuanian state after independence was reinstated.

This religious community was initially formed from Old Believers who had been moved forcibly from the Suwałki and Sejny districts in Poland to Soviet Lithuania in accordance with the treaty between Germany and the USSR on ‘the exchange of populations’, dated 10 January 1941. When the Second World War ended, the Soviet government did not allow these people to return to their place of birth, and, confined to Lithuania, they eventually concentrated in the port city. The KOBC became one of the few new Pomorian communities, not just in Lithuania but in the whole USSR, that formed after the Second World War.

Who is this book aimed at? When reading this comprehensive work, one can see that the author tried to tailor his book to least three relatively different audiences. At first glance, it is a research work, where, in line with scientific research logic, we are presented with historical, anthropological, art research and religious research analyses of a specific
community's existence. Reading the book, it also becomes apparent that the author seeks to tell the community's story to its own members, or a wider Russian-speaking or Russian-understanding audience, and not just because the book is written in Russian, but also on account of the way the text has been constructed. Separate essays are used to uniquely create a somewhat romanticised narrative of the history of the Klaipėda Old Believer Pomorian community: we are presented with the life stories of the best-known or meritorious community members and their families, along with episodes from their lives. Finally, the book also serves to commemorate the consecration of the new Old Believer Church of the Assumption and the Archangel Michael, and honour the sponsors of its construction. On one hand, the fact that the book is capable of being oriented at such a wide circle of readers guarantees it a varied audience, arousing interest not just among researchers but the public at large. It is likely that interest in Lithuania would be even greater if a Lithuanian translation of the book were to be released. On the other hand, its orientation towards such different audiences makes maintaining structural and genre uniformity difficult: in some places repetition is unavoidable; there are also some inconsistencies and riddles.

As is usual in history books, the general structure of the narrative follows a political periodisation: the postwar years 1945 to 1960, the late Soviet period from 1960 to the end of the 1980s, and the period after 1990. This is a logical choice when talking about the religious community's change in relations with the Soviet and independent Lithuanian governments. However, this periodisation becomes a sort of burden for the author, especially when he takes to analysing the identity of the community's members.

The Old Believers' identity is complex, structured along three axes, religious, ethnic and local. Identity, and the question of preserving identity, is one of the important themes in the book, extending throughout the whole text. The author presents a comprehensive analysis of its religious side by framing it within the typology of its members' religiousness according to their behaviour regarding their faith, and how this has changed. He distinguishes groups of 'unlimited faith or the deeply faithful', 'the cautious ones', the ones 'believing in the transfer of tradition', free-thinkers, and non-believers. However, it remains unclear what the author seeks to show by discussing specific community member types in each historical period, especially those that are not attributed to the 'deeply faithful', or that the Khrushchev era somehow changed them in a specific way, unlike under Brezhnev, or not. When talking about these types in different periods, the author chooses a different angle of analysis
each time. Regardless, we learn that the behaviour of the ‘deeply faithful’ during all the Soviet periods remained the same, while the rest of the faithful always had to resolve the conflict between remaining loyal to the Church or to secular groups, that they searched for compromises, and behaved in a more or less conformist way.

This account of the community’s members is full of important and interesting details about practices, the relationship between the *sacrum* and the *profanum* in the daily life of community members, and reveals the great variety within the community. For example, we learn that during the Soviet period the ‘deeply faithful’ abstained from the ideologically supported career model of the day: they limited themselves to the most basic secular education, and were employed in very basic physical labour. Even though this part of the community was so proletarianised and found itself on the very lowest rung of the symbolic status ladder, they did retain high positions in the hierarchy of the Old Believer community. Meanwhile, the rest of the faithful were involved in secular mobility processes: they managed to pursue secular careers, sometimes even holding high positions in the community hierarchy.

If the religious component in this complex identity is analysed in a rather structural way in the book, then the ethnic component is left in the background, and its presentation is rather fragmentary. However, these fragments are very interesting: they can intrigue, astound, and raise many new questions. The importance of ethnicity is felt especially when we are talking about the period when mixed marriages started appearing in the community. These were a serious challenge to the community’s homogeneity. The topic of homogeneity arises in the book in another form as well, when the analysis of the Old Believer community reveals the heterogeneity of the Russian part of Soviet Lithuanian society. It is no secret that the variety of the Russian diaspora in Lithuania was, and is, denied in the public discourse. In revealing this variety, Potašenko consistently supplements the field of similar research in Lithuania, together with Natalija Kasatkina, Andrius Marcinkevičius, Pavel Lavrinec, Regina Laukaitytė, Monika Frėjūtė-Rakauskienė, and others.² By taking this path,

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the author could have gone somewhat further. Potašenko fails to offer a broad and thorough analysis of the ethnic exclusivity of the KOBC, for example, its local identity factor, and its Suwałki-based roots, as he did for religious identity. And it is precisely Old Believers from Suwałki who made up the majority of the KOBC. The author mentions this local identity component frequently, albeit episodically: for example, he refers to a particular Polish, Suwałki local identity (p. 94), or calls it a ‘certain Polish Suwałki undertone’, in which the community paints its members as being noted for their conservatism, and who recall Poland as ‘their home’ (p. 74). This ethnic-local identity component appearing in the life stories of separate community members and their families is linked to the traumatic experience and memory of exile from their homeland.

Nonetheless, the author does not give this ethnic identity component the ‘functional’ meaning it deserves, judging by the comments he presents in the book. For example, Potašenko does not directly relate the ethnic-local identity, Suwałki-based roots, with the first immediately obvious collective act taken by the Klaipėda community, i.e. postwar migration to the port city; nor does he distinguish clearly the preservation of this identity as the reason for their move. In terms of the latter, the author gives rather ordinary reasons for the postwar migration to cities: the search for employment and to keep families together, and also the aim of avoiding the danger emerging in the countryside due to the partisan war, or to avoid the poverty and insecurity caused by collectivisation. However, readers are left with the apparent question why the Old Believers chose Klaipėda over Vilnius. Would it not have been much more logical? Postwar Vilnius, like postwar Klaipėda, had lost enormous numbers of its permanent population, so there was

a huge demand for labour, and possibly an easier chance of finding housing. Both cities, Klaipėda and Vilnius, were suitable places for Russian-speakers to live, as Russians were arriving in large numbers and Russian schools were being established. However, unlike Klaipėda, Vilnius is geographically closer to Suwałki, the homeland of these Old Believers, and Vilnius was a Polish-speaking city. Ultimately, Vilnius even had an Old Believer community going back several centuries. The answer to the motivation behind the choice of migration destination seems to hover in the text: in cited recollections, and even though Potašenko starts to talk about the ethnic-local motive for migrating, this idea is never fully developed, saying instead that people chose to be with their family members or relatives. Nonetheless, judging by the episodes from life stories given in the book, it is evident that this was not just a case of migrating to be with family, relatives or friends, but the emergence of an opportunity to reinstate and preserve their own, previously torn-apart Suwałki Old Believer community in a new ‘vacant’ postwar space by bringing everyone together again. This opportunity was actively pursued by the community members who migrated to the port city in the first decade after the war. In this way, the migration also served as a declaration of a collective identity, and a collective action of a unique type of solidarity, which was, of course, likewise created by religion. A clearer inclusion of the motive to preserve their ethnic-local, and not only religious, identity in the explanation of migration processes would allow for a more accurate description of the links that unified and held the community together.

Perhaps when looking from this perspective at the arrival of the Old Believer community in Klaipėda, it would not appear to be as mystical as the author makes it out to be: he considers it one of the most mysterious and intriguing phenomena of the Old Believers’ religious life in Lithuania after 1945 (p. 97). The inclusion of the functional meaning of the ethnic-local identity in the analysis would help construct more a consistent argument of the often-mentioned exclusivity of the community, which is a distinctive leitmotif of his narrative, allowing him to romanticise or mythologise the community’s arrival in the port city: the KOBC was created without any pre-conceived plan by the Old Believer authorities (p. 47); it was one of the few new Pomorian communities in the Soviet Union and Lithuania, and was the one located furthest to the west (p. 50); it was a very rapidly growing Old Believer community in Lithuania, in 1946–1952, due to mass migration, the new community in Klaipėda became the fastest-growing religious Pomorian community not
just in Soviet Lithuania but in the whole USSR (p. 74); permission was given for the community to become established during the otherwise repressive Sovietisation of Lithuania, which created highly unfavourable conditions for the Catholic Church and religion (the author does mention that in the postwar years Eastern Orthodox and Old Believer churches opened across the Soviet Union, while in Lithuania Catholic, Protestant and Old Believer houses of prayer were closed down) (pp. 48, 102). So, a historic riddle has been told, but not quite answered. It would be interesting to ask the author why this happened in Klaipėda in particular, and to what extent can that positive government view towards the establishment of new houses of prayer and a community’s emergence be related to the ethnic orientation of the Sovietisation policy enacted in the land?

In spite of these remarks, Potašenko lets the reader visualise not an imagined community, to use the term of Benedict Anderson, but the real body and life of an actual community. The book is a multilayered narrative about the church’s creation, the development and also change of community life, the socialisation of the community’s young generations, economic life, religious rituals and daily norms, the links created and maintained and the spiritual culture, the community’s boundaries and its relationship with Others, issues of disintegration and distancing from religion arising within the community, intersections between community life and individualisation, the more deliberate arrival of women into higher positions in the church, and the community’s demographic ageing. This book is a particularly valuable contribution to the history of the new society in Klaipėda after the Second World War as a case study of one separate community.

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